Osborn Wyddel (c. 1230–c. 1293)

Origin and Family

Born c. 1230. Died After 1293.

Father (by tradition): John FitzThomas (c. 1195–1261)
Mother (by tradition): Margery FitzAnthony
Spouse: Heiress of Cors-y-Gedol (by tradition, a ward of the Gwynedd King)

> *One fanciful source, which is repeated in Archaeologia Cambrensis,[7] has Osborn married to Agatha, daughter of the King of Castile and niece to the Queen of Edward I. The King of Castile at the time was Fernando III. He had a daughter, Eleanor, who married King Edward I in 1254, so that might be the genesis of the story. But neither Fernando nor his children had an heir named Agatha. Further, it does not seem possible that a Spanish princess would find herself in North Wales in possession of an estate as a royal ward of a Gwynedd King.*

Children:[1]

1. Cynric Ap Osborn (c. 1270–c. 1343)
2. Einion Ap Osborn

Osborn Wyddel is the earliest Welsh ancestor of the Wynnes, Vaughans, Yales, and several other prominent Welsh families. He came to Wales from Ireland in the thirteenth century and through marriage acquired the estate and lands of Cors-y-Gedol near Barmouth, Merionethshire.[1]

There are two key questions about this pivotal ancestor - was he a Desmond Geraldine, and, why did he leave Ireland and settle in Wales?

There is a well known issue with early Irish-Welsh genealogies. They were often embellished or even invented “to assimilate and lay claim to the legendary past as a way of authorizing the present, to shape particular views of national history, and to explore questions of nobility and prestige, often to propagandistic ends.”[16] There are some good examples of this in “The Medieval Review”, where Welshmen claimed enhanced Irish pedigrees “to promote their claims to national authority in Wales.”[17]

For this reason, modern genealogy practitioners are very cautious with pedigree claims first appearing in the 15th century or later unless they are supported by contemporary annals, charters, or other documents. For Osborn Wyddel, no such sources have been found, so we only have traditional stories to answer both questions above. While these stories are widely published and widely believed, they should be considered “legends based on tradition only”.

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The Geraldine Connection

Numerous antiquaries—including Wynne, Vaughan, Palmer, and Betham—identify Osborn Wyddel as a member of the Geraldine family, Desmond branch, and specifically as a son of John FitzThomas FitzGerald. Heraldic similarities between the Wyddel descendants and the arms of Desmond have been cited in support of this tradition. Among the recorded sons of John FitzThomas, the only individual whose later history is absent is Philip Fitz John FitzGerald, making him a plausible candidate for Osborn Wyddel. However, no contemporary documentary evidence confirms this and no record can be found that suggests Philip is the true identity of Osborn Wyddel.

The first known genealogist to make a Geraldine connection was Gruffudd Hiraethog (d. 1564), who calls him “Osber ap Gwythlachiarll Desmont.” (a likely botched attempt to mean “Osber ap Earl of Desmond”).[17]

However, contemporary sources only record him in Wales as **Osborn Wyddel** (“Osborn the Irishman”). No early Irish annals or Geraldine pedigrees list a son named Osborn, and the evidence for a direct FitzGerald descent is lacking. Later genealogies, including on some modern websites, insert him into the FitzThomas pedigree, but that is not supported by earlier references.

Furthermore, he is often listed in online pedigrees as “Osborn Wyddel FitzGerald” to reinforce the Geraldine connection. This is a historical anachronism - he was known in Wales simply as Osborn Wyddel (Osborn the Irishman), a name he would never have used in Ireland, where he would not have been 'the Irishman,' but rather a member of a specific kin-group.

Even the Desmond-style coat of arms may have been retroactively applied by 15th-century Welsh heralds or descendants to strengthen the Geraldine claim.

From the Welsh perspective, Osborn was considered “short-pedigreed”.[17] A manuscript dating to 1531–1544 lists him among the “beriach,” or families of limited ancestry, in Gwynedd. This suggests that Osborn’s own genealogy was unknown or unremarkable, and that he was seen as a parvenu[17], gaining prominence through marriage and settlement rather than inherited nobility.

In Scenario 1 below, an early reference by Gutyn Owain (1450–1498) does not describe him as a Geraldine. John Davies, in expanding on Gutyn Owain’s manuscript in *A History of Wales*, also does not link Osborn to the Desmonds, noting only that he fled Ireland and took the name Osber Wydell—the stranger from Ireland. Under Welsh law, being a "stranger" was a specific legal category, not just a description - he could not acquire land without Royal grant or consent, for example.

It does seem likely that Osborn had some level of status when he arrived in Wales in order to acquire Cors-y-Gedol through marriage, especially if the heiress was a ward of the Gwynedd King as has been claimed by many sources.

Arrival Scenario 1 - Traditional 1237 Arrival

W.W.E. Wynne wrote of Osborn Wyddel in his *Pedigree of the Family of Wynne, of Peniarth in the County of Merioneth*.[11] In it he quotes Robert Vaughan (d. 1666), styled as the Antiquarian of Hengwrt: “He [Osborn] came to Wales in the reign of Llewelyn, Prince of Wales, in 1237, with whom he was in such favor and credit that he obtained great and large possessions…”[11]

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An early reference is from the eminent genealogist Gutyn Owain (1450-1498), who wrote that Osborn accompanied from Ireland to Wales, Gruffydd, one of the sons of Ednyfed Fychan, minister to Prince Llewelyn. The story behind this trip is offered by John Davies in “A History of Wales”:[2]

> *Ednyfed Fychan was distain, or Prime Minister, under Llewelyn the Great from 1215 to 1246. One of his sons, Gruffydd, was forced to flee Wales for Ireland after writing a “baudy poem” about Joan of England and William de Breos*[2,12]*. Joan was Llewelyn’s wife and sister to King Henry III. Apparently this poem did not sit well with Llewelyn, but later, in 1230, Llewelyn hanged William for “excessive familiarity” with his wife Joan*
>
> *While in Ireland, Gruffydd was befriended by Osborn. In an effort to regain favor with Llewelyn, Gruffydd offered the King a small fighting force of 100 Irish soldiers and horsemen, headed by Osborn. Llewelyn accepted. Llewelyn’s ability to augment his economic and military resources was central to his success.*
>
> *So Gruffydd returned to Wales with Osborn. Some said Osborn left Ireland in consequence of having slain some person of high rank, which would explain a desire on his part to abandon his name in favor of Osber Wyddel – the stranger from Ireland. Osber and his men built a crude fort for their safety. Their first place of settlement was Berllys, which is a contraction of Osber Llys, or the place of Osber, near Cors y Gedol. Some lands adjoining Berllys are called Berdir, or the lands of Osber. At Berllys traces of the fortifications are yet to be seen.*[13]

While the archaeological evidence at Berllys (Osber’s Llys) suggests a historical kernel of truth regarding a fortified Irish settlement, but the 1237 arrival remains the primary obstacle. For Osborn to be a commander of 100 soldiers, he would need to be at least 25-30 years old. If he married at that age, would he then wait 33 years before fathering his first child Cynric (c. 1270)? And we know he was living in 1293, so he would be well into his 80s which is most unusual for a military man.

The chronology alone makes this legend very unlikely, and it is typical of the embellished narratives common among 15th century Welsh genealogists.

Arrival Scenario 2 - Post-Battle of Callann Arrival (c. 1261)

This scenario is offered by the Dictionary of National Biography,[9] Rodney Horace Yale[1], and others.

Osborn most likely fled Ireland following the defeat at the Battle of Callann (1261), where the Geraldines suffered heavy losses. He arrived in Wales, by tradition with a small fighting force - perhaps 100 men - and is said to have offered military service to Prince Llewelyn ap Gruffudd.

If Osborn was a Geraldine, he would have a good motive to change his name to a Welsh-styled name after a major defeat. Victors often took kinsmen of their enemies as hostages or in many cases killed them. He identified himself by his origins (the Irishman) rather than by his allegiance (the Geraldines), which was an expected tactic for political refugees.

Most sources indicate he was granted Cors-y-Gedol by Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffudd 'in requital of service.' While no royal grant survives, the legal reality of 13th-century Wales meant that as a foreigner (alltud), Osborn could only acquire such an estate through the Prince's intervention[2,18]—specifically by being granted the marriage of a noble heiress who, in the absence

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of male kin, would have been a ward of the court. By arranging this marriage, the Prince provided Osborn with an estate (Cors-y-Gedol) in lieu of a cash payment for his military company's service.

Osborn would have thus acquired the estate through marriage within a few years of his arrival in 1261.

This scenario is far more consistent with the historical timeline. Osborn was either a displaced Geraldine seeking to obscure his identity after a catastrophic defeat, or an independent Irish captain who offered his surviving military force in exchange for land and status in Wales.

Property

After arriving in Wales, Osborn married the heiress of Cors-y-Gedol, reportedly aged thirteen or fourteen.[15] The estate lay within the Lordship of men descended from Asser ap Merwydd Goch. Because her father likely died young without male heirs, both she and her lands became wards of the King of Gwynedd.[15]

Cors-y-Gedol

The next six generations of Osborn's descendants remained in Cors-y-Gedol before the Yale Family line relocated to Plas-yn-Yale in the 16th century.

In *The Topographical Dictionary of Wale*s, Osborn Wyddel is mentioned regarding a church he built: "The church is dedicated to St. Dwynwen [likely St. Tanwg's in Llandanwg]…it is an ancient structure, in the early style of English architecture, and has on the north-east a sepulchral chapel, separated from the aisle by a screen, and belonging to the proprietors of Cors-y-Gedol : the walls are ornamented with several monuments to the memory of the Vaughans, the former possessors of that estate"[5]

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End of Life

Osborn Wyddel was living in 1293 as he was assessed in that year, in the parish of Llanaber, towards the tax of a Fifteenth - a subsidy granted to King Edward I - confirming Osborn was still active and the land-holding head of household at that time."[1]

While Osborn's descendants are traced with confidence to the present day, his own origins remain rooted in tradition. If he was a Desmond Geraldine; the Yale lineage extends six generations further back to Dominus Otho. Otherwise, Osborn Wyddel stands as the Yale family progenitor and the earliest historically verifiable ancestor of the line.

Research Notes

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Wikipedia: Osborn Wyddel

Further Reading:

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